

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

Gyana Ratna Sraman

1. Introduction

At the heart of the *Abhidhamma* philosophy is the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, one of the divisions of the Pāli Canon recognized by *Theravāda* Buddhism as the authoritative recession of the Buddha's teachings. This canon was compiled at the third great Buddhist council (第三結集) held in India in the early centuries following the Buddha's demise. The first, at *Rājagaha*, convened three months after the Buddha's *Parinibbāna* (般涅槃) by five hundred senior monks under the leadership of the Elder *Mahākassapa* ; the second, at *Vesālī*, a hundred years later ; and the third, at *Pāṭaliputta*, two hundred years later. The canon that emerged from these councils, preserved in Middle Indian language now called Pāli, is known as the *Tipiṭaka* (三藏) the three "baskets" or collections of the teachings. The first collection, the *Sutta-piṭaka* (經藏) brings together the Buddha's discourses spoken by him on various occasions during his active ministry of forty-five years. The second collection, the *Vinaya-piṭaka* (律藏) is the book of discipline, containing the rules of conduct for the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* (monks and nuns) and the regulations governing the *Saṅgha*, the monastic order. And the third collection is the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* (論藏) the "basket" of the Buddha's "higher" or "special" doctrine.⁽¹⁾

2. The Establishment of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka

Thereafter, it became necessary not only to preserve the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* by committing them to memory, but also to study and expound them. It was found, in the case of the *Dhamma*, as embodied in the collection of *suttas*, that

the form in which the discourses were couched and the contents there of varied largely according to the nature of the audience to whom they were preached. Thus, there are some *suttas* contained more general teachings which were easier to understand. Moreover, the Buddha did not adhere to a particular system in expounding his doctrines; he depended largely on circumstances. Sermons were preached as the time and occasion arose for admonition. Many of the sermons that were remembered and preserved were, therefore fragmentary and often concise.⁽²⁾

Even before the contents of the *Sutta-piṭaka* had been finalized, the Buddha's disciples were analyzing his teachings with methods similar to those employed later in *Abhidhamma*. These early analyses were often incorporated into *Suttas*. After the *Sutta-piṭaka* had been established and its contents determined, *Abhidhamma* investigations were considered to be a separate branch of literature. *Abhidhamma* studies were later compiled into a collection called the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, which was combined with the *Sutta-piṭaka* and *Vinaya-piṭaka* to make up the "Three Baskets" or *Tipiṭaka* of the early Buddhist canon. The canon was limited to these three baskets or collections. In the *Theravāda* School, the term "Pāli" is used with the meaning of "Scripture" to refer to the *Tipiṭaka*, but not to refer to the commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka*..⁽³⁾

3. From *Sutta-piṭaka* to *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*

With the increase in the volume of *Abhidhamma* literature, a special division of the canon, an *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, was established. Before this, the canon went through a transitional phase in which material was placed in a "mixed basket" *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* of the canon.⁽⁴⁾ The *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* (雜藏) was the repository for materials that had been left out of the four *Āgamas*, (阿含) and thus included both early and later texts. The *Mahīśāsaka* (化地部) *Dharmaguptaka* (法藏部) and *Mahāsaṅghika* (大衆部) were among those schools that included the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* in their canon.

The only extant example of such division of the canon is found in the *Theravāda Tipiṭaka* (上座三藏) where it is called the *Khuddaka-nikāya* (小部經) rather than the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka*. The term "*khuddaka*" (Skt. *kṣudraka*) means "small" or "mixed"; but the meaning "mixed" is more appropriate. However, a "mixed *Āgama*"

(*Tsa-a-han ching*, or literally, *ksudraāgama*; (雜阿含) cf. *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (對法俱舍解) p. 466) is included in the Chinese canon (T.99 and 101). Since this work corresponds roughly to the *Pāli Saṃyutta-nikāya* (相應部) and not to the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, the term "*Khuddaka-nikāya*" is translated into Chinese for convenience as *hsiao-pu* or "small section." The *Khuddaka-nikāya* is not small, as it is the largest of the five *Nikāyas*.

Fifteen works are included in the *Pāli Khuddaka-nikāya*. Among them are very old writings such as the *Dhammapada* 法句經 (Words of the Doctrine), *Suttanipāta* 經集 (Collections of Suttas), *Theragāthā* 長老偈 (Verses of the Elder Monks), and *Therīgāthā* 長老尼偈 (Verses of the Elder Nuns). Other texts included in the *Khuddaka-nikāya* were composed at a later date; among these are the *Niddesa*, 義釋 (Exposition) and the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* 無碍解道 (Path of Discrimination). In both style and content the latter two works are similar to fully developed *Abhidhamma* literature, and thus represent a literary stage between the *Nikāyas* and the works of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.⁽⁵⁾ Both texts were compiled around 250 B. C. E., a date that would make them forerunners of *Abhidhamma* literature.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Path of Discrimination) contains discussions of the practical applications of many of the topics found in *Abhidhamma* literature. At the beginning of the text is a list of fifty-five topics that are discussed in the work. These topics are called *mātikā*, a term characteristically used in *Theravāda Abhidhamma* texts. The list of *mātikā* (論母) in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is not as refined or as well organized as those in later *Theravāda Abhidhamma* texts.

The *Niddesa* and *Paṭisambhidāmagga* are found only in the *Theravāda* canon. No texts representing this transitional phase from *Sutta* to *Abhidhamma* are found in extant *Sarvāstivādin* (說一切有部) literature.

4. Dhamma and Abhidhamma

The term "*Dhamma*" refers to the Teachings preached by the Buddha.⁽⁶⁾ Since the Buddha's Teachings concerned the facts of human existence, *Dhamma* can be interpreted as referring to the true nature of human existence. Human existence is made up of constantly changing phenomena and of the basic entities that constitute phenomena. Examples of phenomena existence are the body, the mind, and the external world. For example, within the body are elements such as the vis-

ual, auditory, and gustatory faculties. Since the visual and auditory faculties perform different functions, they have different qualities. The various types of perception and the organs that are the bases of those perceptions are called *indriya* (根). The body is analyzed into visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile organs. The "tactile organ" refers to the skin, flesh, muscles and other parts of the body without the other four sense organs.

The mind is also analyzed into components such as judgments, memories, and emotions. As for example, a list of defilements (*kilesa*欲念) might include lust (*rāga*貪), hatred (*dosa*, or *paṭigha*瞋), pride (*māna*慢), doubt (*vicikicchā*疑), and wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhi*邪見). Other mental faculties were also included in such lists. Some pairs of mental faculties or qualities seem to be mutually exclusive. Such pairs include love and dislike, lust and hatred, and good and bad. Consequently, some *Abhidhamma* thinkers argued that it was unreasonable to believe that all such mental faculties were attributes of a single entity called the mind. Rather, the mind was composed of many mental faculties acting in concert. Mental faculties such as doubt, faith, lust, and hatred were considered to be independent entities, and the activities and changes of the mind were understood in terms of their interactions. The elemental entities of which phenomenal existence was composed were called "*dhamma*," a usage of this term "*dhamma*" is used in the *Abhidhamma* tradition; it often refers to the entities that make up phenomena.

5. God and Soul are not found in the Abhidhamma

Our knowledge of the internal and external worlds is obtained through sensory perception. This world of sense experience is comprehended by mind and matter. Reality, however, is not exhausted by the data of the six sense organs. Ultimate reality transcends the empirical world of relativity. The totality of life is, therefore, fully exhausted by mind, matter and ultimate reality. These precisely define the scope and limit of the subject-matter of the *Abhidhamma*. The data of sensory perception are either corporeal or psychological. Every datum of corporeality or psychology is found to be an instance of contingent existence. The contingent is that which is subject to change and evolution. All corporeal and psychological data are, therefore, of the nature of phenomena, for the non-contingent numeral

nature said by speculative philosophers to underlie them is not yielded to sensory perception. The fundamental generic term which comprehends all phenomena is *dhamma*. The *Abhidhamma* is largely devoted to the discussion of *dhamma* or phenomena. In so far as the empirical world is concerned, the *Abhidhammika* is wholly interested in the modal view of reality. In the view of the *Abhidhammika*, there is nothing in all the data of sensory perception which does not admit of the nature of *dhamma*, for all phenomena are evanescent, non-substantial and lacking in perfect harmony and consistency. As a result of the application of this test of reality, the discussion of a priori categories such as God and soul are not found in the *Abhidhamma*.⁽⁷⁾

6. Four Ultimates of the Abhidhamma

This leads to the *Abhidhamma* definition of what is real in the fundamental sense. This is none other than *paramattha* (最上義). There are four types of this reality,⁽⁸⁾ namely, mind (*citta*·心), co-efficient of mind (*cetasika*·心所), matter (*rūpa*·色) and ultimate reality (*nibbāna*·涅槃). Of these four types the first three are empirical and mundane, while the fourth alone is transcendental. The reality of the first three consists in their capacity for change and evolution. *Paramattha* means fundamental category. The four types of *paramattha* are based on a distinct theory of degrees of truth and reality. Although all four types of reality are commonly called *paramattha*, there is a vital difference in the levels of reality as between the first three and the fourth. The former belong to the realm of empirical reality while the latter belongs to the transcendental realm of the unconditioned absolute. Mind and its co-efficient and matter, although called *paramattha* are not unchanging entities enduring and perdurable in character. They have no underlying permanent nature, while the fourth *paramattha*, namely, ultimate reality, being of a transcendental nature, does not lend itself to verbal predication. The four types of ultimate comprise, according to the *Theravāda Abhidhamma*, a total of eighty two categories. The mind is one ultimate, the co-efficient of mind divide themselves into fifty two ultimate forms, matter is analyzed into twenty eight distinct forms and reality (*nibbāna*) constitutes one ultimate from the transcendental point of view.⁽⁹⁾

7. The World lead by the Mind

The Buddha asserts the supremacy of the mind in the direction and determination of life. The world is led by the mind (*cittena nīyati loko*). This truth leads to the recognition that the proper study of man is his own mind. If the realization of the truth is possible only through the development and purification of the mind, it then follows that the proper understanding of its nature and function must necessarily precedes any serious and successful attempt at such purification and development. Since the *Abhidhamma* teaches the path to the realization of truth, the study of the mind has been given the foremost attention and consideration throughout its discussion of reality. The content of the *Abhidhamma* is thus predominantly psychological. Herein we have the first serious attempt in the history of human thought to place the study of psychology on a scientific footing. It is a system of descriptive and critical psychology which "psychologies" without the aid of a metaphysical psyche. It claims only to describe and analyze psychological situations as they actually occur. The value of the *Abhidhamma* in this regard lies in the fact that it gives us an insight into the mainsprings of psychological life in the individual.⁽¹⁰⁾

The thorough going psychological analyses of the *Abhidhammikas* reflect the heights to which the science of the mind had attained among the Buddhists at a very date in the history of intellectual progress. The classical *Abhidhamma* term for the mind is *citta*. It has other synonyms such as *mano*, *viññāna* and *ceto*. The mind is no abstraction. It is participate in formation. Given the necessary conditions, there is origination of consciousness of one sort or another. Hence the mind is always a specific instance consisting of particular characteristics.

8. Mind as a Sense-door

The mind itself considered as a sense-door is surrounded by five other external sense-doors, the eye, nose, tongue, and body. Perception is described and explained on the basis of the stimuli which impinge on the one or the other of the sense organs. Sensory contact comes about as a result of the coming together of a sense organ and its corresponding object. This sensory contact then leads to the birth of sensations of one sort or another (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory,

tactile and, in the case of the mind, the sixth sense organ, conceptual), which in their turn generate situations which are pleasant, unpleasant or hedonistically neutral. Pleasant sensations conduce to the growth of craving which makes one attach oneself to objects of one sort or another. This attachment provides the motive impulse which keeps a-going the stream of becoming, which is nothing other than the continuity of life in all its manifestations.⁽¹¹⁾

9. Psychological change of human conduct

The *Abhidhamma* deals in detail with the process of perception. According to the *Theravāda* analysis, this is marked by seventeen distinct stages of cognitive and conceptual activity. From the stage of bare awareness up to the point when there is an indelible registration of the cognized object, there are seventeen thought-moments involved. According to this theory it would appear that one moment of physical change is co-extensive and co-eval with seventeen moments of psychological change. Hence, the *Abhidhamma* says that the mind changes sixteen times as fast as matter. The co-efficient of mind are the various no cognitive elements and the *Theravāda* lists them as amounting to a total of fifty-two. These are separately listed, probably on account of their importance for the psychology of human conduct.⁽¹²⁾

10. Analyses of the reality in the Theravāda's Visuddhimagga and Sarvāstivāda's Abhidharmakośa

The *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, which analyses all reality into seventy-five ultimate *dharmas*, adds to the analyses of the *Theravādas* in many important ways. Their extensive classifications are summarized in the *Abhidharmakośa* and the commentaries thereon, just as those of the *Theravāda* are summarized in the *Visuddhimagga* and other commentaries on the books of the canonical *Abhidhamma*.

The analysis of matter in the *Abhidhamma* is significant especially in view of the modern scientific researches into the subject. Matter, according to the *Abhidhamma*, is considered as a function and the *Theravāda* enumerates as many as twenty-eight forms of it.

Perhaps the most important single contribution of the *Abhidhamma* to the history of thought is its fully developed and thoroughly comprehensive theory of causality and relativity. Being a thoroughly consistent attempt at explaining the dependent origination so all phenomena, it is, in its widest empirical sense, a gigantic theory of cosmic dynamics. The most voluminous work of the *Theravāda Abhidhamma*, namely, the *Paṭṭhāna*, is wholly devoted to the consideration of this theory from the point of view of its application to the facts of sensory perception.⁽¹³⁾

11. Conclusion

The *Abhidhamma* deals at length with the mechanics of mind control and with the techniques of psychic development of the mind. The primary aim here is to indicate the path to the realization of wisdom or *paññā*. The *Abhidhamma* concludes with the discussion of the ultimate reality of *Nibbāna*. The latter is more frequently defined in ethical terms and more rarely as the unconditioned Absolute which transcends all antinomies. Through out this discussion the *Abhidhamma* avoids the subtler metaphysics of the later Buddhist Absolute Idealists.

Reference :

- (1) Bhikkhu Bodhi(Ed.) : A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma. BPS Kandy, Sri Lanka 1993, pp.1-2.
- (2) G. P. Malalasekera(Ed.) : Encyclopedia of Buddhism. The Government of Ceylon, Ceylon 1961, p.65.
- (3) In Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, Chap.3, V.96, p.87, and chap.14, v.71, p.381, the term "Pāli" and "Aṭṭhakathā" (commentary) are mentioned together, indicating that Pāli was used to refer to the Tipiṭaka. The word "Pāli" thus has the meaning of both the Pāli language and scripture.
- (4) E. Lamotte : History of Indian Buddhism. Louvain-Paris 1988, p.159-63 ; Egaku Mayeda : Genshi Bukkyo seiten no seiritsushi kenkyū, p.681 f.
- (5) Kogen Mizuno : "Pali seiten seiritsushijo ni okeru Mugegedo oyobi gishaku no chii."
- (6) Tetsuro Watsuji : "Bukkyo ni okeru ho no gainen to kū beshohō," p.461 f ; Ensho Kanakura "Bukkyo ni okeru ho no go no gen'i to henshen" and "Bukkyo ni okeru ho no imi," p.83f ; Akira Hirakawa : "Genshi Bukkyo ni okeru 'ho' no imi," pp.1-25.

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

- (7) G. P. Malalasekera (Ed.) : Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. Govt. press of Ceylon, Colombo 1961, p.44.
- (8) Mrs. Rhys Davids (Ed.) : Compendium of Philosophy. PTS 1967, p.81.
- (9) + (10) W. S. Karunaratne : Buddhism Its Religion and Philosophy. Buddhist Research Society, Singapore 1988, pp.78-9.
- (11) G. P. Malalasekera (Ed.) : Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. Govt. press of Ceylon, 1961, p.44.
- (12) Dr. W. F. Jayasuriya : The Psychology & Philosophy of Buddhism. Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia 1988, pp.12-4. ; G. P. Malalasekera (Ed.) : Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. Govt. press of Ceylon, Colombo 1961, p.44
- (13) W. S. Karunaratne : Buddhism Its Religion and Philosophy. Buddhist Research Society, Singapore 1988, p.80